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Against the Grain

By William Safire

WASHINGTON, Nov. 9—Adm. Stansfield Turner's first public failure as Director of Central Intelligence saved the Soviet Union hundreds of millions of dollars in hard currency, and cost the United States what might have been a useful negotiating point.

The C.I.A. is charged with the responsibility of maintaining accurate, current estimates of the economic strength of our adversaries; which so often determines military strength and diplomatic objectives.

The most important element in estimating the economic muscle of the Soviet Union is grain production. To measure that central activity, the C.I.A. works with the Department of Agriculture, underwrites NASA satellite surveillance, monitors grain in Australia and Canada, debriefs travelers and probably employs a few agents in Ukrainian grain fields.

Two weeks ago, this extensive, expensive C.I.A.-Agriculture overt-covert intelligence reported publicly that the Soviet grain production would exceed the announced Soviet goal by two million tons, to a healthy (and market-depressing) 215 million tons.

Last week, President Brezhnev announced a surprise: Grain production in his country would be only 194 million tons. The American intelligence community was stunned: a 10 percent error was egregious, especially since we were sensitized by our 1973 forecast error which permitted "the Great Grain Robbery."

Blandly, the Agriculture spokesman next day agreed that the Soviet production would indeed be 194 million tons. Since President Carter disbanded the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, and since Senate oversight is more concerned with abuses than quality, no hard questions were asked of the Director of Central Intelligence

about the failure of our intelligence gathering.

But here is the significance of that failure: We have a five-year agreement with the Soviet Union to sell it no less than six, no more than eight million tons of grain each year. If it wants more, Moscow is expected to notify us, so that our markets remain orderly, and our investors and speculators are not suckered by those possessed of inside information.

Last August, the Soviets neatly—and legally—circumvented that arrangement by secretly buying contracts for most of their shortfall from the European subsidiaries of American grain companies and other traders who do not have to report their sales of "all origins" grain futures. Of course, the corn would have to come from the United States market; but by not specifying they were buying United States grain, and by encouraging the

"all-origin" grain contracts, plus United States permission to make that place of origin the U.S.A. Then, and only then, did Mr. Brezhnev break the news that our estimates were far off and the Soviet Union needed to buy grain heavily.

Zapped again. Had the C.I.A. and the Agriculture Department been awake—and there were plenty of American travelers and Chicago grain traders who tried to wake them up—we could have at least caused the Soviets to pay the higher rates that will prevail when the grain is delivered.

More important, we could have used the Soviets' desperate need for our corn to extract some concessions on human rights, or to put a little more backbone in our position on SALT.

To many Americans, the subject of grain sales is a MEGO—my eyes glaze over—yet there is an interesting lesson here:

We expect the Soviets to trade keenly, like capitalists. But if, in a period when they are actively promoting détente, the Soviets make a mockery of the spirit of our grain agreement by taking such advantage of loose reporting requirements, can we be confident of Soviet good faith in negotiating hard-to-verify arms agreements?

And we can tolerate a certain margin of error in the C.I.A.'s economic intelligence estimates. But if all Admiral Turner's satellites, meteorologists, debriefers and spies can be so wrong about the way the grain is growing or rotting in open fields in the Ukraine, can we be confident of his recent intelligence estimates—by more sensitive and more closely guarded areas like the production and deployment of intercontinental missiles?

ESSAY

C.I.A.-Agriculture believes that the Ukrainian harvest was bountiful, the Soviet Union was able to buy cheap and save hundreds of millions of dollars.

With much of their secret grain buying already completed, the Soviets sent their trade delegation to the United States in the first week of October. Still thinking the Soviets had no need for extra grain, the American negotiators offered—or were subtly induced to offer—the Soviet delegation the right to buy 15 million tons of grain in the United States, which just happened to be the amount the Soviets needed from the U.S. this year.

At that point, the Soviets had the